

Building a Better World

Building a Better World

A Contemporary Augustinian Perspective



Arthur Purcaro, O.S.A.

Foreword by
Pope Leo XIV

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Foreword

Saint Augustine reflects upon the power of words and on the importance of the word as the vehicle that communicates truth to others. In Sermon 293, he writes: “Note that if I think of what I am going to say, the word already exists in my heart. But if I want to speak to you, I am concerned to render present to your heart what is already present in mine.”

Father Art Purcaro, in this book on *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, has succeeded in communicating what he has held in his heart for many years, as an Augustinian, priest, missionary, and especially as a disciple of Jesus. Art Purcaro now offers to his readers some of the fundamental principles that continue to guide men and women throughout the world as they seek to follow the Gospel in the spirit of Augustine. And he then takes the additional step of demonstrating how that spirituality and lifestyle continue to offer a vital message to all of us today.

The particular perspective that Fr. Purcaro takes in this reflection on *The Rule of Saint Augustine* is expressed in the title he has given to the book: *Building a Better World: A Contemporary Augustinian Perspective*. Augustine’s *Rule*, written almost 1600 years ago, continues to offer a living spirituality that is of meaning and value in our own times.

As the Church celebrates the tenth anniversary of the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’*, it is more than appropriate to point out that Pope Francis clearly recognized the deep relationship between living human relationships (important for Augustine, as we see clearly throughout *The Rule*) and the care of the gift of creation. In

number 226 of *Laudato si'*, we can find some of these same values so important in Augustine: restlessness, relationships, respect:

We are speaking of an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full. Jesus taught us this attitude when he invited us to contemplate the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, or when seeing the rich young man and knowing his restlessness, “he looked at him with love” (Mk 10:21). He was completely present to everyone and to everything, and in this way, he showed us the way to overcome that unhealthy anxiety which makes us superficial, aggressive, and compulsive consumers.

The message of Augustine, as lived and taught by Fr. Art Purcaro, is something that will benefit the readers of this book. Just as Saint Augustine encourages the reader of his *Rule* to use it as if looking in a mirror, so too can this book be an opportunity for reflection and prayer, which can then become a new pathway to walk together with one another in harmony, in order to move forward in peace, with God and with the world around us.

Leo P.P. XIV

Preface

I am writing this while celebrating my fiftieth anniversary of priestly ordination. I chose to celebrate that day with a good friend of many years, from our time together in Peru and Rome, Cardinal Robert Prevost, O.S.A.

As it turns out, the day of my anniversary was the day of Pope Francis's funeral, so we both concelebrated, but not exactly as either one of us thought we would. Shortly after that, in God's wisdom, Cardinal Prevost became Pope Leo XIV, and I returned to my original plan, which was to spend time at our monastery in San Gimignano, Tuscany, to write the book that had been stirring in my heart for quite a while.

When Pope Leo stepped out on that balcony on May 8th, he let everyone know he is a son of Augustine, an Augustinian. As am I: born and raised in an Augustinian parish in the Bronx, New York; I entered the minor seminary at thirteen and the novitiate at seventeen, which was when the Chicago Province of the Order of Saint Augustine accepted Pope John XXIII's invitation to open a mission in Chulucanas, Peru. I volunteered.

I started in Peru in 1971 and knew from day one that this was what I was called to do. We had the chance to build the Church, which the Second Vatican Council had affirmed was needed, and the Bishops' Conference of Latin America spelled out for us, more in line with the Gospel Jesus announced in word and deed, inaugurating the reign of God. What a great privilege to be able to work with so many dedicated people: laity, religious, men and women, from many different backgrounds and countries, but most significantly, with the wonderful people of Chulucanas.

Those I met and worked with, friends eking out a subsistence-level existence in the Sechura Desert, along with families in the Andes Mountains, were isolated from one another by staggering distances and elevations to make their portion of communal land produce and keep their families alive.

Along with the people of Chulucanas, we lived through ten years of terrorist violence, which tried to stamp out any signs of progress in solidarity on behalf of the impoverished population. The terrorists wanted the huddled masses to rise up, throw out their government, and replace it with one more to their own ideological liking. They were openly against the colonial imperialism many nations endure even now.

Back in the United States, on home visits, is when it was hardest: to go into a store and see the abundance, the variety, the waste of which so many people were unaware. If God has created everything for everybody, why can't we do a better job of sharing with others, as God shares with us? There would be no violence, no hunger, no prejudice, if we could only recognize that we are one family, given one planet as our common home to share.

While dedicating my ministry to that goal, I was asked by my community to join the Augustinian leadership team in Rome to promote structural change more in line with these values. It was during this time in Rome, when Fr. Prevost became the Prior General of the Augustinian Order, that we had the chance to live and work together again for another six years.

I found expression for what was in my heart in Pope Francis's groundbreaking letter *On Care for Our Common Home* (*Laudato si'*). At sixty-five, I returned to my Augustinian Province in the United States and began to teach at Villanova University, where each semester I am surprised to find a class full of students interested in the two major topics I enjoy so much sharing with them: liberation theology and stewardship of creation.

My hope now is to be able to share with you what has been graciously shared with me: the wonderful gift from a loving God of so much bounty, which somehow we have managed to mangle

and mess so that most of the people on our planet suffer want and misery to such a degree that it must bring God to tears.

This work is meant for anyone interested in living a more harmonious life. It is written for those who are not willing to accept the status quo, how things currently are, either for themselves, for others, or for nature itself. This is for those who want to be better, to do better, to share more. This is particularly for those women and men, young and old, laity and religious, who personally or in community, in their home or neighborhood, strive to follow *The Rule of Augustine* and want to continue to grow in the process of living in harmony.

The purpose is to encourage and assist in the process of caring for our common home and all its inhabitants, leaving no one out. *The Rule of Augustine* serves as a focus for greater attentiveness to the cry of the poor and of the planet founded on the interdependence and interrelationship of all of creation. It can be used in family or local community meetings, neighborhood or regional gatherings, as well as in programs of initial and ongoing formation.

General Introduction

Building a Better World: A Contemporary Augustinian Perspective is all about living in harmony. This is the fruit of my personal experience and that of many other Augustinian friars and laity striving to apply to our contemporary society the life promoted by Augustine in *The Rule* he wrote in Northern Africa over sixteen centuries ago.

A society and a world that places an exaggerated emphasis on a primarily individualistic spirituality and relationship with God, at the expense of relationships with others, ourselves, and the world around us, has yielded its fruit: external deserts that mirror our own interior desert, lamenting and reaching out restlessly to God.

Ours is an age of Trinitarian or communal spirituality that encourages us to demonstrate, by our deeds, that we have been created in the image and likeness of God-who-is-community. This is the right time for Augustinians to renew our commitment to community life and to communal holiness, giving witness in the Church and society in general to the particular gift of our charism, with one soul and one heart entirely centered on God.

The possibility of a more Christian culture or a civilization of love depends directly on the measure in which each one of us, our family, our community, and society itself, takes into account and bears witness to the fact that God wants to save and sanctify us, not individually and in isolation, but by forming a people (*Gaudium et Spes*, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 9).

Harmony is defined as “a pleasing combination or arrangement of different things” or “a situation in which people are peaceful and agree with each other, or when things seem right or suitable

together.” In our world, we have too few experiences of true harmony, where differing positions and patterns achieve a balance through dialogue and compromise.

If we turn to current affairs, so much of what is in the news involves discord of some sort, conflicting concerns, escalating confrontations, and devastating violence. So much of our national history is a recounting of wars and battles; our heroes tend to be generals and other imposing figures. Tolerance and appreciation for diversity are fleeting virtues; harsh words and incompatibility serve to make the dream of living in harmony idyllic.

The biblical concept of harmony is a profound expression of God’s desire for unity and peace among all people and all of creation. It calls us to reflect the intrinsic balance within the Trinity in our relationships and to work toward the restoration of God’s intended plan for the world: abundant life for all, forever.

In a theological context, harmony is a vital aspect of Christian life, reflecting the unity and love that characterize the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through the practice of charity, humility, and forgiveness, believers are called to live in harmony and thereby glorify God and bear witness to God’s transformative power in the world.

Yearning for harmony or communion has been at the heart of what it means to be human, a part of both our origin story and the goal of people, as well as of creation itself, throughout history. This restless search for harmony is in our DNA as well as in the destination point of our internal GPS—to become more fully alive to the extent that we go out of ourselves to enter into harmonious relationship, or communion, with God, self, others, and nature itself.

Pope Francis held up Saint Francis (for whom he took his name upon being chosen as pope) as an outstanding example of care for the vulnerable and nature itself, as a sign of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. The pope saw his namesake as principally concerned about God’s creation and those who are impoverished and excluded, pointing to the saint’s simple lifestyle and superb harmony with God, with others, with nature, and with himself (*Laudato si’*, no. 10).

Our understanding of God as Trinity, identified as harmonious relationship or communion, is what moves us to share as God shares with us: without condition and without limits. Jesus himself is the authentic witness to the call to give testimony to this truth, being a self for others, emptying his very self in order to share life in abundance with us and all of creation.

Harmony can be understood as becoming more attuned with the Creator, especially as conductor of creation. Similar to how a conductor leads an orchestra so that the music produced by the different instruments can be appreciated as a whole, so too the beauty of all creation can be appreciated because God, who is our Creator and conductor, not only assembles the elements of creation by calling all to come together but also created all to exist in balanced harmony.

The human-made dichotomy distinguishing the spiritual from the material serves to explain (or better, to excuse or attempt to justify) the constant but ever-growing abyss between the continually diminishing percentage who covet and collect constantly greater abundance, and the enormous majority of the human race that wallows in an ever diminishing share of what God has created for the good of all, and not just a few. It is as though possession of material goods, as some sort of exclusive or private property, was meant to be deserved or merited by a chosen few rather than shared and enjoyed among all as a gracious gift. Our restless longing for harmony calls us to live simply and share selflessly, so that all may simply live.

Harmony pursues appreciation for the spiritual and material dimensions of the unique reality of creation, which is called integral ecology.

Integral Ecology

Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'*, subtitled *On Care for Our Common Home*, was a groundbreaking text that wove environmental concern into the fabric of Catholic theology. It introduced the concept of integral ecology, a view of the world where social,

environmental, and economic issues are interdependent and need to be addressed together. The crisis we now face, given its complexity and interconnectedness, demands a new approach if we are to treat the roots of the crisis. This approach requires a new way of seeing, thinking, and acting, and offers a profound insight into how we can tackle the ecological crisis in an integrated way.

Integral ecology takes a holistic approach to human interaction with the environment, including the economic, social, political, cultural, ethical, and spiritual dimensions, highlighting the interconnectedness of all life on Earth. Such an ecology requires the vision and conviction to think about comprehensive solutions to both an environmental and a human crisis.

As Pope Francis astutely asserted in *Laudato si'* (no. 240), “the human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures.” People centered on themselves fail to recognize a need for either God or others and readily treat them as objects while also considering the rest of creation to be in their power, subject to their domination.

Pope Francis declares that these four levels of relationships (self, God, others, and creation or the natural world) are interrelated and interdependent, making evident the need to be attentive to hear the cry of the poor and of the planet, to care for both creation and all our sisters and brothers, but with special concern for those who have been excluded from many of the benefits of God meant for all of us to share.

While the term integral ecology may be an unfamiliar one, the concept it embraces occupies an essential role in the Catholic Church’s thinking and approach to tackling the environmental challenges today. Drawing upon the wealth of wisdom of the Church, Pope Francis urges us to view both the environmental and human crises through an integral approach, as a way for us all to work together to protect the Earth, our common home.

Integral ecology weaves together the myriad approaches to the natural world to respond as effectively and timely as possible to

the complex ecological problems that face us, our communities, and our world, in an evolving universe. In effect, integral ecology unites consciousness, culture, and nature in service of sustainability.

Faced with this global and urgent threat, many believe that we can engineer our way out of this crisis. After all, technology and the industrial revolution got us into this mess; therefore, the reasoning goes, technology and human ingenuity can get us out of it. But trying to solve the ecological crisis by developing new technical solutions can only treat the symptoms, not the cause.

When we view the crisis through the lens of integral ecology, rather than seeing each discrete problem in isolation, we begin to see that everything is deeply interconnected. This integrated view reveals a deeper insight. Not only are the ecological problems interconnected, but there is also an interconnection between the ecological crisis and the human crisis. For the human crisis, just like the environmental one, is made up of a wide range of issues affecting the human family; from extreme poverty to social inequality, from modern slavery to human trafficking, from poor working conditions to mass migration, and many more.

The insatiable desire for economic growth drives the production and market for ever-cheaper consumer goods, which drives the depletion of Earth's natural resources, and it is also a driver for cheap labor, which drives poor working conditions, which drives weak environmental standards, which drives pollution, which drives greenhouse emissions, which drives climate change, which destroys livelihoods, which drives mass migration, which drives growth in urbanization, which drives an increase in slum dwellings, which drives social inequality, which drives poor social and health services, which drives an increase in poverty, which drives despair and violence.

All of these issues are interconnected, and each problem cannot be solved without tackling the others. Integral ecology shows us that the ecological crisis is not simply a series of problems to be fixed but rather is a symptom of something that goes much deeper. Because at the heart of the ecological crisis lies a deep human and

spiritual crisis, in that we have forgotten who we are and where we have come from.

Nature is not something separate from us, or a mere setting in which we live, but rather we are part of nature, included in it and in constant interaction with it. Through the lens of integral ecology, we can see that we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis, which is both human and environmental. Or to put it another way, the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are two sides of the same coin: creation. Everything is interconnected.

Just as ecology is the relationship of living organisms and their environment, we cannot regard ourselves as separate or disconnected from the ecosystems in which we live. Just as the Earth's ecosystems have worked harmoniously for millions of years, we too are part of a complex network of interconnected relationships that we may never fully comprehend or understand.

When we forget where we belong, we behave as lords and masters with dominion over creation, entitled to plunder her at will. Creation is viewed simply as an object to exploit. That same mindset of domination is also how we treat each other. When nature and humans are seen solely as a source of profit and gain, this has serious consequences for both our planet and the human family. This is why the human and ecological crises both share a common source.

When we view reality through the lens of integral ecology, we can see how all creation is a web of life that includes human and social dimensions. By understanding where we belong and our interconnectedness within the ecosystems that sustain us, we will no longer see God's creation as an object, there simply to serve our needs, but rather, we will come to a deeper understanding of our interdependence and our place of belonging within the delicate web of life.

By doing so, we can dedicate time and energy to care for each other, as well as the Earth, our common home. Given the urgency of our current situation, this new way of thinking and acting is needed now, more than ever. As a result, strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring

dignity to the excluded, and, at the same time, protecting nature. In such an “economic ecology,” the protection of the environment is seen as “an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it,” as Pope Francis states.

The common good calls for respect for the human person as well as the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups. It requires social peace, stability, and security, which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice (understood as a fair distribution, equitable allocation, or just apportionment of resources and benefits within a society). For Pope Francis, it is obvious that “where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.”

Saint Augustine

Augustine (named pretentiously a “little emperor” after the Roman Emperor Augustus) was born in Tagaste, in Northern Africa, in AD 354. Monica, his mother, was a Christian of indigenous Berber ethnicity, and Patricius, his father, a mid-level Roman official, identified with the Roman Empire, which ruled this part of the world and treated it as its breadbasket. The culture in which they lived was Roman. These loving parents craved and planned for their child to be successful in the Roman fashion: to have a profession and command respect, so as to provide for them in their old age.

After a typical Roman education, their son certainly achieved their dream: He became an orator or rhetorician of the Roman Emperor, in Milan, well remunerated, surrounded by fawning family and fans. At the very height of his career, he turned his back on the prestigious position, along with the fame and salary accompanying what he had achieved, to follow Christ by living the radical communion of goods exemplified in the Acts of the Apostles. He, and those closest to him, converted and were baptized in the Catholic faith.

Augustine and his entourage returned to his birthplace, Tagaste, to the humble piece of property his father had left him, and gathered those who wanted a life in common, where all things were shared among the community members while generously taking care of the neighboring poor, after the example of Christ and his disciples. This path was chosen by those who wished to serve God and others by sharing material and spiritual goods with them, to better bear witness to the God they served, a God who they understood to be dynamic relationship, unbounded goodness, who in Christ emptied himself to become not only one with us but our servant.

Augustine was enamored of the ideal presented in the Acts of the Apostles, describing life in the primordial Christian community of Jerusalem in which the believers shared their possessions:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day, they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

Harmony, as Augustine understood it, was not a permanent state but an ongoing process that required careful attention, attentive listening, and sustained practice through dialogue. Augustine experienced the disruptive decline of the Roman Empire, as internal struggles and invasions drove the vast realm toward collapse. In this atmosphere, Augustine centered much attention on peace, not simply as the absence of violence, but as a harmonious relationship of justice and friendship. In Book XIV of his opus, *The City of God*, Augustine wrote: “God desired not only that the human race might be able by their similarity of nature to associate with one another, but also that they might be bound together in harmony and peace by the ties of relationship.”

Augustine’s early community in Tagaste developed into a movement when Augustine was chosen, in the fashion of the times, to become priest, then bishop, of the Catholic Christian community in nearby Hippo, an African port city, which would later be conquered by invading Vandals shortly after Augustine died in AD 430.

Augustine was able to establish a community to join him as a priest, and another community when he was made bishop. Many people followed the example of their pastor and established similar communities in the surrounding countryside.

It is believed that, to provide basic guidelines for these early communities, around the year 397, Augustine penned, in outline form, an appropriate orientation, which was gathered and copied repeatedly, in order to be shared. The original document is known to us as *The Rule of Augustine*, and it guides many groups of men and women religious, as well as the laity, throughout the world today. It allows us to benefit from Augustine’s comprehension of the importance of self-awareness and awareness of the presence of God.

As is frequently the case in the Fathers of the Church, Augustine refers in a masterly way to the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. In Augustine, we find a series of rich and expressive texts that illustrate the ideal of living in harmony through the images of the building of the temple and musical harmony.

The Choir

What is a symphony? The harmony of voices . . . It is the symphony to which the Apostle referred when he said: I urge you brothers, all to speak the same thing, that there be no divisions between you (1 Cor 1:10). Who does not delight in this holy symphony, that is to say, the harmony of voices, not each one going its own way, without anything inadequate or out of tune, that might offend the ear of an expert? Harmony is of the essence of the choir. In a choir, what is pleasing is the single voice, as a result of many others, which maintains unity without dissonance or discordant notes. (Sermon 119A, 9)

Praise his name in choir. What is a choir? Many of you know what it is and, precisely since I am speaking in the city, without doubt, almost all of you know. A choir is a group of singers who sing with one voice. If we sing in choir, let us sing harmoniously. Any discrepancy of voice in the choir of singers offends the ear and disturbs the choir. If the voice of the singer is out of tune and disturbs the harmonious canticle, how much more will dissonant heresy disturb the harmony of those giving praise? The whole world already forms the choir of Christ. Christ's choir resounds from East to West. Then another Psalm says: From the time the sun rises until it sets, praise the name of the Lord. Praise his name in choir. With kettledrum and psaltery let them give praise. Why take up the kettledrum and the psaltery? So that not only the voice praises, but also your acts. When the psaltery and the kettledrum are taken up, the hands accompany the voice. This will happen to you if, when you sing the hallelujah, you are offering bread to the hungry, you are clothing the naked and welcoming the pilgrim, since then not only is the voice singing, but the hands are accompanying it, since works go hand in hand with voices. You picked up the musical instrument, may your hands accompany your tongue. Nor

must the ministry be encompassed by the psaltery and the kettledrum fall silent either. (Sermon 149, 7-8)

You are the trumpet, the psaltery, the zither, the drum, the choir, the strings, the organ, and the sounding cymbal of merriment in the things that sound good, because they are harmonious. Do not think here of anything mean or superficial or vulgar. And, since perceiving according to the flesh is death, let every spirit praise the Lord! (Sermon 150, 8)

The Temple

What happened here, when this building was raised, happens now when the faithful in Christ come together. Believing is, in a certain sense, equivalent to drawing the trees and stones from the woods and mountains; being catechized and formed is comparable to the task of felling, polishing, and smoothing in the hands of the carpenters and stonemasons. Nevertheless, these beams and stones do not set up the house of God more than when one or the other of them are adjusted through charity. If these beams and these stones are not combined in a certain order, if they are not peacefully adjusted, if in any way they are not brought together in a mutual embrace, no one would enter here. (Sermon 336, 1)

Place the counsels of the prophets and the apostles as cement in your hearts. Lay your humility in front of you, as a smooth and flat pavement. Defend together, in your hearts, the salutary doctrine with prayer and the Word, as firm walls. Light them up with the divine witnesses as if they were lamps. Support the weak as if you were columns. Shelter the needy under the roofs, that the Lord our God may recompense the worldly goods with eternal goods and may possess you forever once the building is completed, built and dedicated. (Sermon 337, 5)



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